

Gorbachev Daunted, Not Defeated, on Trip

Lithuanian Independence Still at Issue

By David Remnick
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VILNIUS, U.S.S.R., Jan. 14—Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev—his face weary, his tone at once imploring and bitter—won some respect during his three-day mission last week to Lithuania, but few converts.

For a politician who has scored global triumphs, he found his attempts here to temper Lithuanian demands for independence to have been a trial fraught with frustration and limits.

Gorbachev, who returned to Moscow Saturday, promised a transformed union, including a mechanism under which Soviet republics could secede, and he hinted at the possible rise of a multi-party system. Yet he discovered that Lithuanians were, in the main, unyielding in their quest for independence.

One of Gorbachev's key tactics was to make the Lithuanians feel what he called the "burden" of their choice, urging them to "think a thousand times" before making a move that he said would bring Lithuania to economic disaster and cost the entire union dearly.

But day after day, it seemed that Gorbachev and the Lithuanians were talking past—not with—one another. Gorbachev and the Lithuanians are considered two of the most progressive forces in the increasingly broad range of Soviet politics, and yet their angle of vision, their sense of history, is so at odds that they cannot readily agree.

Gorbachev, at 58, represents the generation influenced most deeply by the 20th Party Congress in 1956 at which Nikita Khrushchev dealt the first real blow to the Stalinist legacy with his "secret speech" on the "cult of personality."

"The Children of the 20th Party Congress," as one documentary film here calls Gorbachev's generation, are tied to the notion that Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms represent the "last chance" to overhaul the Soviet Union in its present shape and create a humane form of socialism.

For all his radicalism, Gorbachev does not see the Soviet Union as an empire, a product of czarist and Communist conquest, but rather as a "multinational union." He focuses on "the current realities"—the inexorable, and often forced, blending of ethnic minorities and of economic and political crosscurrents among republics.

"I am looking ahead," he insisted here again and again. "You are looking to the past."

If Gorbachev creates conditions granting Lithuanians an option to secede, it would probably be because he has decided that holding on has become politically too expensive. With Estonians, Latvians and independence movements in other re-

publics watching the Lithuanian question closely, however, that time is not likely to come very soon.

In Gorbachev's view, the Soviet Union and its reform program cannot afford what one Politburo member, Alexander Yakovlev, recently called "a domino effect" of secessions.

Such is the position of the Kremlin reformer. The Lithuanians see history and politics in quite another way.

"It is very simple. We are an occupied land," said Vytautas Landsbergis, president of the powerful pro-independence movement, Sajudis, and a deputy in the Congress of People's Deputies. "Only now we can say it, of course, but we have never considered ourselves a genuine part of the Soviet Union. That is something Gorbachev does not quite understand. We wish his perestroika well, but the time has come for us to go our own way."

The Baltic states came under Soviet control as part of Stalin's prewar treaties with Nazi Germany. Although the Congress of People's Deputies has condemned the secret protocols of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which led to the Baltic states' annexation, the Communist Party leadership insists that there is "no connection" between the treaty and "present political realities."

For Lithuanians, however, a sense of human and historic loss looms over those "present political realities." Between 1940 and 1949, historians estimate, nearly a half-million Lithuanians were forcibly deported from their homeland and tens of thousands were executed.

It is no accident that the Baltic states have taken up Gorbachev's perestroika and become the regional avant-garde of reform. The Baltic states, which experienced two decades of independence between the two world wars, have a far richer historical memory of non-Communist politics than does any other region in the country. Their experience of Communist domination is only a few years longer than that of the nations of Eastern Europe.

Nearly every week in the Baltics features an attempt to create a future by recalling the past and looking West. Last week in the Estonian city of Tartu, representatives from Sweden, Finland, West Germany, France and Britain helped Estonians establish a Social Democratic Party. Many Communists, including Popular Front leader Marju Lauristin, turned in their party memberships to join the Social Democrats.

Lithuania will hold multi-party legislative elections Feb. 24. Even the ostensibly Communist politics of Lithuania are such that Kaziemera Prunskiene, the

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GORBACHEV, From A12

Lithuanian deputy prime minister and a member of the republic's Politburo, is an economist who speaks with rapture of an "independent Lithuania with a free-market system."

Gorbachev knew before coming here that Lithuania's political climate bore little resemblance to that of the Slavic republics, and that popular opinion heavily favored outright independence. But standing among those Lithuanian voices, hearing them directly, was something that seemed to throw him off balance.

At an emotional encounter with Lithuanian intellectuals Thursday night, Gorbachev asked, "Well, what is it then? Do you really want to secede?"

"Da!" came the resounding affirmative answer.

After a pause, Gorbachev said, "Well, then, at least now the country knows where you stand."

The question, now, is where does Gorbachev stand? Although his political position is strong, Gorbachev is once more facing an issue that troubles not only him but his conservative opponents in the huge party apparatus and elsewhere.

That sense of lingering anxiety never seems to leave the political scene under Gorbachev for a single day. As Machiavelli wrote in his 16th century treatise on power, "A great reformer is always an endangered prince."

Certainly, Gorbachev's campaign to keep Lithuania within the union did not end when he flew back to Moscow. The Communist Party Central Committee will soon resume this month's plenum and is

expected to consider issues of party reform, including the Lithuanian party's decision last month to split with Moscow.

Also, Gorbachev said during his trip that while he was adamantly against secession, the government was drafting a law on procedures through which a republic could split from the union.

Both the Central Committee plenum and the shape of the new law will show more of Gorbachev's thinking on the Lithuanian question. The Sajudis leadership is convinced for now that the law—which Gorbachev promised would be put up for "nationwide discussion and referendum"—is intended to block, rather than facilitate, secession.

"These are vague promises and they seem to be designed to gain time," said Algis Cekoulis, a member of the Lithuanian Politburo.

As he closed a wearing four-hour meeting with Lithuanian Communists Saturday, Gorbachev took the microphone once more and thanked his audience. "We'll see each other again," he said. The smile left his face, and he went home.